

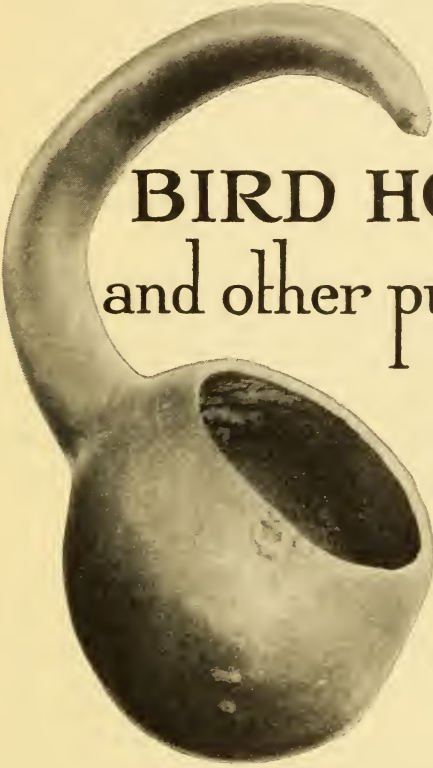
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GOURDS

for

BIRD HOUSES
and other purposes



GOURDS FOR BIRD HOUSES AND OTHER PURPOSES

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GOURDS, though closely related to pumpkins, squashes, cucumbers, and melons, have hard shells and are employed mainly for ornamental purposes and as containers of various sorts. Some kinds of gourds, however, when young and tender, are used for food, being prepared in the same manner as garden varieties of summer or soft-shelled squashes.

Historically, various types of gourds are among our oldest cultivated plants. The lagenaria gourd, extensively used as water flasks and as containers for other things, has been found in Egyptian tombs of the Twelfth Dynasty, or about 2200 or 2400 B. C.

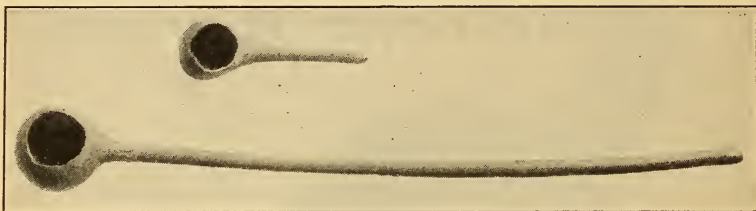


FIGURE 1.—Gourd dippers

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Gourds commonly cultivated in the Northern States (*Cucurbita pepo* var. *ovifera*) are small in size, inedible, and are used mainly for ornamentation, but some specimens are large enough to serve as houses for very small birds, such as the house and Bewick's wrens. Many varieties are listed by seedsmen. Pear, Orange, Egg, Miniature, Bicolor, and Turk's Turban are the principal sorts.

Lagenaria gourds (*Lagenaria vulgaris*), variously referred to as Siphon, African Pipe, Dipper, Anaconda, Bottle, Calabash, Hercules Club, Powder Horn, Spoon, and Sugar Trough, are larger fruited, the gourds often having grotesque and odd shapes, varying from pear shaped to the long curved forms often several feet in length. The hard shells are used for drinking cups, water jugs, storage containers, bird houses, and other purposes. Some kinds are of great size, ancient writers having recorded specimens as large as 18 inches in diameter, 3 or 4 feet long, and weighing 80 pounds. Most varieties grown by American gardeners are comparatively small.

The Snake gourd belongs to another branch (*Trichosanthes*) of this interesting and variable family. It is a more or less bushy plant and not so well adapted to use for screen purposes as are other gourds. The so-called vegetable sponge, or dish-rag 'gourd, belongs to the genus *Luffa*. The fibrous interior is used after bleaching and other processes as a sponge or for scrubbing.

Gourds are tender annuals but when planted under favorable conditions make a rampant growth. They are adapted to culture throughout the continental United States except at altitudes where the temperature is too low and the growing season too short for their development. They should have day temperature of about 70° to 80° F., with night temperatures some 10 to 15 degrees lower. A growing season of about 150 days is needed. In certain localities where culture would otherwise be impossible gourds may be grown by starting the seeds indoors in pots or plant bands and transplanting to the open ground upon the arrival of warm weather. In most localities the seeds should be placed in the ground as soon as it has warmed up, usually about 2 to 3 weeks after the last frost.

In common with other cucurbits, gourds thrive on good soil. One well supplied with rotted manure is best. On account of their running habit and ability to climb over a support, such as a trellis, gourds are excellent for screening purposes.

Culture may be limited to the control of weeds. The plants are not usually seriously affected by insects and diseases, but when trouble of this character occurs, control measures for enemies of cucumbers and melons, as discussed in Farmers' Bulletin No. 1371,¹ should be employed.

Some of the uses of gourds have been mentioned in preceding paragraphs. As far as Americans are concerned, gourds are at present employed mainly for ornamentation and as bird houses.

Uses In some parts of the world gourds are of great value, entering into the everyday lives of the people as household utensils. Some varieties are even used as cooking utensils, but their main use is for drinking cups (fig. 1) and vessels.

Gourds when mature but not thoroughly dried out are easily cut and cleaned, the interior being reduced at maturity to seeds and a



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FIGURE 2.—Gourds put up for purple martins should be firmly attached to limbs of bare trees or a cross arm on a pole

¹ GILBERT, W. W., and POPENOE, C. H. DISEASES AND INSECTS OF GARDEN VEGETABLES. U. S. Dept. Agr. Farmers' Bul. 1371, 46 p., illus. 1924.

little fibrous material. Cutting a hole of the desired shape and size is much easier, however, when the gourd is a little green, and drying will be facilitated by the opening thus made. When dried hard and well cleaned, gourds are light, firm, and fairly durable, lasting several seasons when exposed to the weather if not at the same time put to hard use. Frequently used gourd utensils, as a rule, must be replaced at shorter intervals.

Gourds are well suited for use as nesting quarters for birds, because they are weatherproof and easily prepared for use and fastened in place. In the Southeastern States especially, groups of gourds put up for martin domiciles are a common sight. (Fig. 2.) The gourds are wired to the limbs of a bare tree or to cross arms on a pole, either of which supports, for best results, should stand well isolated from trees, buildings, or other objects of about the same height. Large-gauge (16 or more) copper wire is best for fastening gourds.

The proffer of gourd homes to birds need not be restricted to martins, however, and gourds for other birds may be fastened singly to trees or to posts where they are likely to be occupied.² To insure a variety of bird tenants, the entrance holes should be of various sizes. Holes 1 inch in diameter will admit house and Bewick's wrens; $1\frac{1}{8}$ inches, the chickadee and the Carolina wren; $1\frac{1}{4}$ inches, the downy woodpecker, the tufted titmouse, and the white-breasted nuthatch; $1\frac{1}{2}$ inches, the hairy woodpecker, the bluebird, and the tree swallow; 2 inches, the crested flycatcher and the starling; while $2\frac{1}{2}$ -inch openings will accommodate the flicker and the purple martin. Entrances should be well above the bottom of the gourd; this not only gives space for nesting material but prevents fledglings from leaving the nest prematurely. Holes may be cut to exact size with an expansion bit, but in any case should not vary much from the size indicated for the bird desired.

The size of the gourd also should be in proportion to the size of the bird, for it is useless to invite a large bird to nest in a small gourd. The large bird obviously can not use such a gourd, and smaller ones will shun it on account of the gaping opening. The flicker needs quarters about 7 inches in all inside dimensions, the purple martin, 6; the bluebird, 5; and the house wren, 4 inches.

It may not be convenient to clean the gourd through a hole of the smaller sizes specified. In this case the big end of the gourd can be sawed off, the interior cleaned out, and the altered gourd wired to a bit of board of appropriate size. Whether the bottom of the nest is of board or not, a few small holes should be provided for drainage. Gourds that last over winter in good condition will be more inviting to birds if thoroughly cleaned out.

² Principles to be observed in placing bird houses are discussed in the following publication: KALMBACH, E. R., and MCATEE, W. L. HOMES FOR BIRDS. U. S. Dept. Agr. Farmers' Bul. 1456, 22 p., illus. 1925. Copies of this bulletin can be obtained upon application to the Office of Information, U. S. Department of Agriculture, Washington, D. C.

This leaflet is a joint contribution from the
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